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Divine Service

Delivering Forgiveness of Sins

JOHN T. PLESS



THE DEBATE OVER THE USE OR NON-USE of traditional Lutheran liturgical forms has emerged as a hot topic in the life of American Lutheranism. In the Summer 1994 issue of *dialog*, Ted Peters characterized it as "worship wars." For some, no doubt, what I have to say will create more heat. My intention, however, is not to enflame the debate but to shed light. I shall attempt to speak as forthrightly as possible, not to offend, but to set the issue before us with clarity.

Contra David Luecke, the current controversy is not a matter of "style" versus "substance." It is clear from the apostolic church as well as from the Evangelical-Lutheran Reformation that the substance of the gospel shapes and defines the style of that gospel's delivery. Further, I believe it is spiritually dangerous to equate liturgy with adiaphora. Liturgy will always confess or deny the gospel, and the gospel is never an adiaphoron. This brings me to the major thesis of this essay: The crisis over the liturgy is a result of confusion over the forgiveness of sins. As such, it is a doctrinal issue and, therefore, ultimately church-divisive.

LITURGY IS DIVINE SERVICE

The "high church/low church" labels may have their usefulness within Anglicanism, where churchmen are identified as "high and crazy, broad and hazy, or low and lazy." These titles are inadequate for the Church of the Augsburg Confession, however. Liturgical renewal movements in the early part of this century (such as the Society of St. James and the old *Una Sancta* magazine) may bear part of the blame for our present predicament, as some of their champions tended toward a liturgical romanticism that was long on aesthetics and short on doctrine. Thirty-five years ago, Hermann Sasse opined "that the great tragedy of the Liturgical Movement was its inability to face doctrinal issues."¹ For Lutherans, liturgy is not a matter of aesthetic sensitivities or antiquarian preferences, but of doctrine, of confession.

Article VII of the Augsburg Confession "defines the church liturgically," to borrow a phrase from the Australian Lutheran theologian John Kleinig. Article VII confesses that "it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word" (AC VII, 2; Tappert, 32). Notice that the Augustana does not define the church on the basis of the mere presence of word and sacrament, but by the fact that the gospel is purely preached

and the sacraments are rightly administered in accordance with the divine word. Preaching of the word and administration of the sacraments require liturgy. Word and sacrament are not static commodities, but means through which the Lord himself is working to constitute and sustain his church. To be sure, Augustana VII holds that the true unity of the church is not grounded in the uniformity of ceremonies instituted by men, but these humanly devised ceremonies are not the liturgy.

The liturgy is *Gottesdienst*,² divine service, the Lord's service to us through the proclamation of his word and the giving out of his body and blood. In the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, God is the subject, not the object of liturgical action. The trajectory is from the Lord to his church and then from the church to her Lord. In Luke 22:27, just after he had established the Supper of his body and blood, the Lord says, "I am among you as one who serves." This verse embodies the Lutheran understanding of the liturgy; it is the service that Jesus renders to his church, given by grace and received through faith. Rome had reversed the flow with the insistence that the Mass is essentially a sacrifice that the church offers to God. Reformed Protestants likewise define worship as human activity, namely, the church's obedient ascription of praise to the majesty of a sovereign God.

Gordon Lathrop³ and the framers of "The Graceful Use of the Means of Grace: Theses on Worship and Worship Practices"⁴ are representative of a stream in contemporary American Lutheranism that sees liturgy as ritual re-enactment. Here we have shades of ancient mystery religions. In the Winter 1996 issue of *dialog*, Roy Harrisville, in his typically humorous manner, pokes fun at such ritual performance, calling it "liturgical hocus pocus" and "cult magic."⁵

For confessional Lutherans, liturgy is not about human activity, but about the real presence of the Lord who stoops down to put his words into our ears and his body and blood into our mouths. Liturgy, as it is divine service, delivers the forgiveness of sins. The liturgy does not exist to provide edifying entertainment, motivation for sanctified living, or therapy for psychological distresses, but the forgiveness of sins. In his treatise "Against the Heavenly Prophets," Luther writes:

If I now seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or the gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross (AE 40: 214).

JOHN PLESS, a *LOGIA* contributing editor, is campus pastor at University Lutheran Church, Minneapolis.

In the liturgy God himself is present to forgive sins. The real presence of Christ, the forgiver of sins, in his words and with his body and blood has shaped the *cultus*, the liturgical forms of confessional Lutheranism.

CONFUSION ABOUT FORGIVENESS

At the present time, Lutherans are being invited to trade off a liturgical form shaped by the real presence of Christ the Forgiver for another form. The form that we are invited to make our own has its roots in American Evangelicalism. The forgiveness of sins has no real presence within the theology of Evangelicalism. At best, troubled sinners are pointed back to Calvary. The problem is, as Luther has reminded us, that forgiveness was achieved at Calvary but not delivered there. Calvary is back there in time almost two thousand years ago. At its worst, Evangelicalism turns the troubled sinner inward to his own conscience. This is a gross mishandling of law and gospel, as Dr. Walther reminds us in Thesis IX of his *Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*:

the Word of God is not rightly divided when sinners who have been struck down and terrified by the Law are directed, not to the Word and the Sacraments, but to their own prayers and wrestlings with God in order that they may win their way into a state of grace; in other words, when they are told to keep on praying and struggling until they feel that God has received them into grace.⁶

This subjectivism is embodied in the hymnody and liturgical practices of Evangelicalism. The *cultus* of Evangelicalism exchanges the absolution for assurances of grace, the gospel as the efficacious Word of salvation for a gospel that invites and requires a human decision, and the supper of the Lord's body and blood for a symbolic recollection of the upper room. Where is the forgiveness of sins?

Lutherans are being invited to trade off a liturgical form shaped by the real presence of Christ the Forgiver for another form.

As I stated earlier, the crisis over the liturgy stems from confusion regarding the forgiveness of sins. Evidence for this assertion can be seen in a new book by Timothy Wright, one of the pastors at the ELCA's Community Church of Joy in Phoenix. In his book *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship*,⁷ Wright attempts to answer the question "How can we use worship to attract and hold irreligious people?" Wright finds the structures of Lutheran liturgy to be a roadblock in the evangelistic task. At the very least, Wright urges Lutherans to "warm up the liturgy" with a visitor-friendly campus, name tags, careful directions, and a corps of well-trained greeters and ushers. But more is needed. The confession of sins will have to go. Wright says:

Some congregations begin the worship service with a time of confession and forgiveness. Long time churchgoers may appreciate opening with this important liturgical rite, but starting the service with confession and forgiveness says to the guests: "You are sinners!" For years some people have stayed away from church, fearing such condemnation. Finally, having the courage to come, they hear from the start how bad they are—that they cannot worship until they confess their failures and shortcomings.⁸

We are told to "watch out for religious phrases in hymns." All this talk about "cherubim and seraphim bowing down before him" and "a bulwark never failing" will only confuse visitors. Preachers are instructed to remember "in preparing a message, the question is not, 'What shall I preach about?' but 'To whom shall I preach?'" Therefore preachers get this advice from Wright: "The how-to section of a bookstore provides a great resource for relevant sermon ideas. The psychological and self-help sections prove especially helpful. Written to meet the needs of people (and to make money), the authors focus on sure-fire concerns." When it comes to the sacrament of the altar, Wright has this to say on closed communion: "This policy will not work in a visitor-oriented service. 'Excluding' guests will turn them off. It destroys the welcoming environment that the church tried to create."⁹ Again, my question: Where is the forgiveness of sins?

Wright would have us abandon Lutheran liturgy for the sake of "cross-culturalism." He is, in effect, inviting us to abandon the means-of-grace-centered culture of Lutheranism for the increasingly pragmatic culture of American Evangelicalism.¹⁰ This is an invitation that we must decline for the sake of the gospel.

THE AMERICAN CONTEXT

What is to be done? First, let us recognize that the ecclesial-religious culture of North America is Evangelicalism. This culture has its roots first in Puritanism, which is basically Calvinistic, and secondarily in the great revival movements of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The ethos of American Evangelicalism is at home in North America. As Nathan Hatch has pointed out in his book *The Democratization of American Christianity*,¹¹ the Jeffersonian ideas of individual freedom and equality are congenial to Evangelicalism's emphasis on conversion as a personal decision and the church as a spiritual democracy. Evangelicalism's stress on the autonomy of the believer and the immediacy of spiritual experience apart from sacramental means has shaped a religious culture that accents individual faith over churchly life and tends to characterize baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper as externals at the periphery of the Christian life, at best. Subjectivity, coupled with a suspicion of the intellect, has produced a religious culture that elevates heart over head, emotion over intellect. Lutherans can no more compromise with this culture than Luther could strike an agreement with Zwingli or than the confessional Lutherans of the nineteenth century could join the Prussian Union. Evangelicalism is of a different spirit.

In a culture that has been so deeply influenced by Evangelicalism, it is imperative that we emphasize our Lutheran distinctiveness. As the Formula of Concord confesses:

We believe, teach, and confess that in a time of confession, as when the enemies of the Word of God desire to suppress the pure doctrine of the holy Gospel, the entire community of God, yes, every individual Christian, and especially the ministers of the Word as leaders of the community of God, are obligated to confess openly, not only by words but also through deeds and actions, the true doctrine and all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God. In such a case we should not yield to adversaries even in matters of indifference, nor should we tolerate the imposition of such ceremonies on us by adversaries in order to undermine the genuine worship of God and to introduce and confirm their idolatry by force or chicanery (FC SD, X 10; Tappert, 612).

At the time of the Formula, the challenge was an attempt to impose Roman ceremonies on Lutherans in order to give the impression of unity. Today the challenge is from the other side of the fence as some Lutherans give the impression that there are no substantial differences between themselves and American Evangelicals.

Actually, this is not a new challenge to the Missouri Synod. The so-called American Lutheranism championed by Samuel Simon Schmucker in the last century caused C. F. W. Walther to write:

We refuse to be guided by those who are offended by our church customs. We adhere to them all the more firmly when someone wants to cause us to have a guilty conscience on account of them . . . It is truly distressing that many of our fellow Christians find the differences between Lutheranism and papism in outward things. It is a pity and dreadful cowardice when one sacrifices the good ancient church customs to please the deluded American sects, lest they accuse us of being papistic! Indeed! Am I to be afraid of a Methodist, who perverts the saving Word, or be ashamed in the matter of my good cause, and not rather rejoice that the sects can tell by our ceremonies that I do not belong to them? . . . With this we are not insisting that there be uniformity of perception or feeling or of taste among all believing Christians—neither dare anyone demand that all should be minded in this as he is. Nevertheless it remains true that the Lutheran liturgy distinguishes Lutheran worship from the worship of other churches to such an extent that the houses of worship of the latter look like lecture halls in which hearers are merely addressed or instructed, while our churches are in truth houses of prayer in which Christians serve the great God publicly before the world.¹²

Thus it is for good reason that the Constitution of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod follows Walther in making a condition for membership in the synod the “exclusive use of doctrinally pure agenda, hymnbooks, and catechisms in church and school.”¹³

THE LUTHERAN CURE

There are several implications for congregational life and pastoral practice. Rejection of the “alternative worship movement” is not an affirmation that all is well in congregations that stick to the

hymnal. Kenneth Korby has commented that there are three kinds of churches: (1) churches with the liturgy, (2) churches without the liturgy, and (3) liturgical churches. There are congregations that never depart from page 5 or 15 in *TLH* or page 158 in *LW*; they have the liturgy, although they really don't know why. Then there are congregations that have abandoned the liturgy altogether. Genuinely liturgical churches, however, are at home in the liturgy; it is the source and center of their life.

Congregations should expect the seminaries of the synod to provide pastors who are fully at home in the liturgy.

I have no doubt that one of the reasons “alternative worship forms” have been so eagerly embraced by many in the Missouri Synod is that the liturgy was never taught, and the richness of our hymnbooks was left largely untapped. It is not the liturgy that is the problem, but the way it has been misused. In his chapter “Liturgical Renewal in the Parish” in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, Arthur Just writes:

A chapter on liturgical renewal suggests that the liturgy is in need of renewal. . . . Perhaps what is wrong is not the liturgy but those who use the liturgy. The targets of liturgical renewal are the clergy and the congregation.¹⁴

Congregations should expect the seminaries of the synod to provide pastors who are fully at home in the liturgy. At the present time, our seminaries require only one course in liturgy. This is hardly sufficient in preparing pastors who must be equipped to understand the theology of the divine service and plan and lead liturgy accordingly. A basic course in the theology of the liturgy should be foundational for at least two other required courses in the mechanics of the divine service: (1) the rubrics and the actual conduct of the service, and (2) liturgy as it relates to pastoral care, namely, the occasional services. A strengthened curriculum in liturgical theology needs to be set in the context of a vibrant liturgical life on campus. The chapel should model the absolute best of our heritage.

If we get the forgiveness of sins right, we will get the liturgy right. Luther writes in the Large Catechism:

We believe that in this Christian church we have the forgiveness of sins, which is granted through the holy sacraments and . . . in short, the entire Gospel and all the duties of Christianity. . . . Therefore everything in the Christian church is so ordered that we may daily obtain full forgiveness of sins through the Word and through signs appointed to comfort and revive our consciences as long as we live (LC, II, 54–55; Tappert, 417–418).

For Luther and the confessions, the church is constituted in the liturgy—that is, she receives her life from Christ in his words and gifts, which deliver the forgiveness of sins. No wonder, then, that our confessions place sermon and sacrament at the center, insisting that our churches have not abolished the Mass but celebrate it every Sunday and on other festivals (Ap XXIV).

Our concern for the liturgy is not fueled by a traditionalism that is intent on merely preserving the past. It is a concern that the forgiveness won by our Lord in his suffering and death be proclaimed and distributed in their truth and purity for the salvation of sinners. Liturgical texts and practices are to be evaluated from this perspective.

Our historic, Lutheran, liturgical orders are Christ-centered as opposed to man-centered; they reflect the theology of the cross rather than the theology of glory; they center in special revelation not natural revelation; they tie us to the means of grace; they appeal to faith instead of emotions; and they anchor us not in myth but in the incarnation.

Two comments on the importance of teaching are in order. Let the pastor begin by teaching the board of elders or church council. Why not build in forty-five minutes to an hour of study time to each meeting of the board of elders? Over the period of a year, the pastor could work through the basics of our doctrine and practice of liturgy on the basis of the Scriptures and the confessions.¹⁵ Any liturgical changes that are to be made in the worship life of the congregation must be undergirded with substantial teaching.

The teaching of the liturgy is a key component in the catechesis of new members.

The teaching of the liturgy is a key component in the catechesis of new members. I have argued elsewhere that catechesis is the lively link between evangelism and liturgy.¹⁶ The liturgy is not readily understandable or accessible to the unbeliever. Through catechesis the unbeliever is transported from the culture of this world to the culture of God's colony on earth, the holy church.¹⁷ The culture of God's colony has its own language, the language of faith. The language of faith is the language of the liturgy. Drawing on Neil Postman's analysis of entertainment, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. of Calvin Seminary, Grand Rapids, describes what happens when Christians forget this basic fact and fashion services in the mode of entertainment:

Naturally, services of this kind give an impression of a religion somewhat different from historic Christianity. One could imagine a visitor walking away from such a service and saying to himself: "I had it all wrong. I had thought Christianity included a shadow side—confession, self-

denial, rebuke of sin, concern with heresy, willingness to lose one's life for the sake of Jesus Christ. Not so, apparently. The Christian religion isn't about lament or repentance or humbling oneself before God to receive God's favor. It's got nothing to do with doctrines and the struggle to preserve the truth. It's not about the hard, disciplined work of mortifying our sinful self and learning to make God's purposes our own. It's not about the inevitable failures in this project and the persistent grace of Jesus Christ that comes so that we might begin again. Not at all! I had it all wrong! The Christian faith is mainly about celebration and fun and personal growth and five ways to boost my self-esteem. And especially, it's about entertainment.¹⁸

The language of the liturgy, the language of faith, aims not for entertainment but edification. Catechesis teaches the convert this language. Three books are essential to this catechesis: the Holy Scriptures, the Small Catechism, and the hymnal. The doctrine that is drawn from the Scriptures is confessed in the catechism and expressed doxologically in the liturgy and hymns.

CONCLUSION

Remember the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32? The children of Israel, fresh out of Egypt, are encamped in the Sinai wilderness. They do not know what has become of Moses. The people go to Aaron with the request for "new gods." Aaron is responsive to their "felt needs" and fashions for them a golden calf, a "worship form" that was culturally relevant to their Canaanite context. This was entertainment evangelism at its best, as we read that "the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play" (Ex 32:6). Even though Aaron called it "a feast to the Lord" (Ex 32:5), God called it idolatry. The apostle Paul writes: "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come. . . . Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry" (1 Cor 10:11, 14).

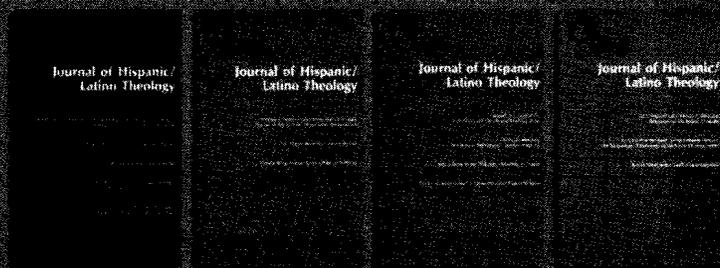
The opposite of idolatry is faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, faith is the highest worship of God, as the confessions so often remind us. No forgiveness of sins, no faith. The liturgy delivers us from self-chosen forms of worship, drawing us out of idolatry to repentance and faith. The introduction to *Lutheran Worship* gets it right:

Saying back to him what he has said to us, we repeat what is most true and sure. Most true and sure is his name, which he put upon us with the water of our Baptism. We are his. This we acknowledge at the beginning of the Divine Service. Where his name is, there is he. Before him we acknowledge that we are sinners, and we plead for forgiveness. His forgiveness is given us, and we, freed and forgiven, acclaim him as our great and gracious God as we apply to ourselves the words he has used to make himself known to us.¹⁹ **LOGIA**

NOTES

1. Hermann Sasse, "The Liturgical Movement: Reformation or Revolution?," *Una Sancta* 17 (St. Luke the Evangelist 1960): 18.
2. For a fine exposition of *Gottesdienst* see Norman Nagel, "Whose Liturgy Is It?," *LOGIA* 2 (Eastertide 1993): 4-8. Also see *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, ed. Fred Precht (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1993), 44-57.
3. See Gordon W. Lathrup, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).
4. See *Lutheran Forum* 29 (August 1995): 18-24.
5. Roy Harrisville, "On Liturgical Hocus Pocus," *dialog* 35 (Spring 1996): 150.
6. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1928), 2. Also see Robert Schaibley, "A Lutheran Strategy for Urban Ministry: Evangelism and the Means of Grace," *LOGIA* 3 (Holy Trinity 1994): 6-13.
7. Timothy Wright, *A Community of Joy: How to Create Contemporary Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 24.
8. *Ibid.*, 42.
9. *Ibid.*, 46, 86, 102, 122.
10. See the following critiques written from within Evangelicalism: Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993); Douglas Webster, *Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992); Michael Scott Horton, *Made in America: The Shaping of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991); David Wells, *No Place for the Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); and David Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994).
11. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
12. C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 1: 194.
13. *Handbook of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1992), 11.
14. Arthur Just, "Liturgical Renewal in the Parish," in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, 21.
15. Additional resources for the teaching of the liturgy include *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*; Roger D. Pittelko, *Worship and Liturgy*, Touchpoint Bible Study (St. Louis: CPH, 1995); Harold L. Senkbeil, *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness* (St. Louis: CPH, 1994); Harold L. Senkbeil, *Sanctification: Christ in Action—Evangelical Challenge and Lutheran Response* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1989); John T. Pless, *Real Life Worship Reader* (Minneapolis: University Lutheran Chapel, 1994).
16. See my GEM module entitled *Catechesis: The Lively Link between Evangelism and Worship*.
17. I would argue, along with David Wells, that much of Evangelical worship is reflective of "the world's view." Lutheran worship is reflective of "the Christian view." Also see Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994); Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Dean O. Wenhe, "Entrance Into The Biblical World View: The First and Crucial Cross-Cultural Move," *LOGIA* 4 (Easter 1995): 19-23.
18. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 193.
19. *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982), 6.

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